How do ‘children who foster’ perceive fostering?

There has been an increasing awareness of the important role that the children of foster parents play in fostering. Within the Integrated Services Programme various initiatives have been set up to support these young people and to value their contribution. As part of this, Wendy Spears and Melanie Cross have sought the views of ‘children who foster’ about fostering. The results of 20 interviews and three group sessions with children who foster are presented here. Although they acknowledged the difficulties, these young people appeared to value and to have benefited from the experience of fostering in many cases. They were asked specifically to give advice to others in the same position and this also provides valuable insights. The results of this study have implications for the way the children of foster families, and indeed their parents, are trained and supported. The role of children who foster is not always clear and it is important that this is carefully negotiated with them and with their families. These young people can be instrumental in the success or failure of a placement.

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Introduction

Even when foster carers have fully discussed their intention to foster with their own children, and have their full agreement, the consequences are often not appreciated. (Doorbar, 1993, p 184)

It's not just parents who foster, it's the whole family. (Martin, 1993, p 17)

There has been a great deal of research into fostering recently. However, limited research has been published on the experiences of birth children of foster parents. There is reference in the literature to the effects birth children may have on placement outcomes, for example, one of the risk factors in foster placement breakdown is the presence of carers’ own children (Bebbington and Miles, 1990). This implies that children who foster are pivotal in the success or otherwise of a foster placement, but little is known about the impact of fostering upon birth children themselves. Foster parents and others may be concerned that fostering could have a negative effect on their own children. Bebbington and Miles (1990) found that the average age of the youngest child in a foster family was ten, and only one in eight families had children under five, which suggests that parents make a conscious decision to foster when their birth children are older, perhaps in order to reduce any negative impact on them.

A study in Scotland showed that 80 per cent of children who responded liked fostering (Part, 1993), as did other studies (Reed, 1994; Pugh, 1996). However, many said they often found fostering upsetting and difficult. In spite of this, the majority of the young people also said they had greater maturity and insights as a result of fostering.

Martin (1993) points to a confusion of roles in carers’ children as they are expected to relate as peers to foster children, but there are also considerable demands on children who foster in terms of patience and understanding. Martin (1993), along with other writers such as Pugh (1996), Twigg (1994) and Part (1993), has pointed out the need to develop adequate training, preparation and support for these children in recognition of the significant role they play in fostering.

The research reported here aimed to inform and improve practice by considering this important but often underestimated part of the fostering team. We wanted to hear what children who foster thought of the issues raised in the literature, how they felt fostering had affected them, what skills they needed, how they had acquired them and how they were supported in this crucial role. We also attempted to investigate the potential confusion of roles. Should children who foster be telling foster children what to do
and how to behave? Should they be their friends? Should they keep secrets?

Within the Integrated Services Programme (ISP) there is an awareness of the contribution to fostering made by birth children of the families involved, and indeed the stresses this may expose them to. ISP offers a variety of services to children who foster. Before they begin, an evening for children of families wishing to become foster parents is provided. This is facilitated by a social worker, as well as children who foster. Each ISP centre also convenes a group for these children who foster three times a year, where there are opportunities to speak in private, support each other and have fun. If any individual work or support is necessary, this is available from the social worker responsible.

Part of the motivation for this research was to evaluate these services and to ascertain whether children who foster needed any different kinds of support or training.

The current study
This research began when a small focus group of children and young people who foster met with the researchers to discuss their experiences. Their discussion was recorded and emerging themes were used to formulate questions for the current study. It was decided to include young people aged between eight and 18 as it was felt that they would be sufficiently articulate and confident to discuss fostering with a researcher.

There were 41 eligible young people. Letters were sent to foster carers in the organisation, explaining the project and asking for their permission for us to contact their birth children. All parents responded to our initial letter and there were no objections to the children participating. Following this, we wrote to all the young people and invited them to come for interview. The purpose of the research was explained to them verbally as well as in the initial letter we sent out. (Thankfully no child protection issues occurred.) The young people gave written permission for us to record their interview using a mini-disk recorder, after we outlined the aims of the research again and explained why we needed to record our discussions.

The interviews were conducted in private with an interviewer who had no direct link to the fostering services and who had not met the majority of the young people before. Since she had little direct experience of fostering, apart from working for an organisation where it occurs, she was genuinely curious and sometimes ignorant about how fostering works in practice. We hoped that being interviewed by someone outside of fostering would enable the young people to feel relaxed and be honest.

We aimed to make use of the best features of structured and unstructured interviews. The interviews were semi-structured in that they included a set of open questions which had been generated by the focus group, but the interview also followed the young person’s train of thought if they wanted to talk about other issues. The questions were adapted as the research progressed because the young people raised issues we had not anticipated. We then asked other participants whether these issues were relevant to
them. The questions were also rephrased dependent on the young person’s age and ability to communicate. The use of open-ended questions allowed for personal comments, which ‘provide richer information than standardised ones’ (Giddens, 1993, p 687).

Some young people were not able to attend for interview but were still keen to take part over the telephone. These interviews were over more quickly as the lack of non-verbal feedback made it more difficult to be responsive to the interviewee, but they still provided useful information.

**The questions**
The questions we asked were as follows, though not necessarily phrased in this way or in this order:

- What did you know about fostering before you got involved?
- What is it like to foster?
- How do you get to know when someone is coming to stay with you?
- What information do you receive?
- How do you get to know them?
- How do you deal with secrets?
- What do you do if there are problems?
- What do you do if you get stressed/upset?
- What do you do if you get stressed/upset?
- What are the positives?
- What are the negatives?
- What have you gained from fostering?
- Can you tell me about the rules for you and the foster children?
- How do you deal with endings?
- What do your friends think about fostering and the children you foster?
- What has helped you or what would help you to foster?
- What advice do you have for children who foster?
- If you could turn the clock back, would you still choose to foster? Why?
- When you are older would you foster? Why?

**The responses**

*The process of becoming a child who fosters*

Some of the young people were too young to remember life before fostering, but those who could recalled lots of forms and meetings. Some found the initial process upsetting but most made less comments. There was no sense of them being consulted by people from outside the family, but within the family there was generally a degree of consultation and discussion before the decision to foster was made. Fifteen out of 20 of the young people said they would have liked more preparation. Of those, four had received some preparation since it is now part of the ISP assessment process for children of prospective carers to meet with children who foster.

*When a foster child arrives*

Sometimes the children who foster had been involved in the decision to take a foster child, particularly if the placement was planned. This seemed to depend on the age of the young person: they appeared to get more involved as they grew older. Some relied entirely on their parents for information. Others were aware that there was a degree of censorship on the information they were given, for example:

*They don’t tell me everything because they are not allowed to; they tell me what I need to know.*

Eighteen of the 20 children interviewed had clear preferences as regards to the foster children they could live with. Many thought younger children were easier: ‘then they don’t want to borrow my stuff’; others liked younger children because ‘I can tell them what to do’. There were also definite ideas about whether it was preferable to have children of the same or opposite gender. Part of this was about whether or not they would take more of their parents’ attention. One young person said they thought it was easier if the foster child did not speak English!

Some respondents seemed surprised to be asked how they got to know a foster child; they automatically ‘just talk to them’. Others said that they found playing
with them and asking questions useful. They try to find out what the young person likes and is interested in. Several were sensitive to the possible pitfalls of asking questions:

*I’m not allowed to ask them about their background because it might upset them.*

One girl said that telling them about herself was a good way to get them talking about themselves.

Race was only mentioned in these interviews once, in relation to a foster child who was an asylum seeker. The young person who fostered had an acute awareness of where it would be safe to take this foster child and where he would encounter racism, sometimes violent.

**Secrets**

Some young people said that they had kept secrets when foster children had asked them to; most said they would not. The interviewer encouraged discussion about what kind of secrets should and should not be kept and was satisfied that these were not serious secrets. One young person said that they were not sure how to decide which secrets to keep and which to tell.

**Sources of support**

Most of the participants said that they went to their parents for help if there were any problems or if they felt stressed. Parents seem to reduce the effects of many negative situations. For example, if things were stolen or broken parents would replace them. Parents also helped when it came to dealing with feelings; for instance, one young person said:

*She [mother] helps me keep my temper if I get mad.*

Siblings were often mentioned as a source of support as well. Contact with other children who foster had been useful for some and indeed there were several specific requests for the ‘children who foster’ support network to be strengthened and extended. Some would have liked the support of someone else outside the family, perhaps when the foster family was under particular stress. Foster children were also mentioned as a source of support, one saying, ‘they have helped me when I’ve been attacked’.

The advantages of being involved in fostering

One of the most often mentioned advantages was that they have been involved in something they can be proud of because:

*You can help children who need a home to be treated well.*

It’s rewarding to help others.

Fifteen of the 20 children and young people felt that they had gained in confidence through the experience of fostering. Some considered themselves to be better at communicating and listening. Having gained confidence and communication skills, a few said that they found it easier to make friends. It seems that, for a significant number, having fostered makes it easier for them to deal with the outside world.

The relationship with the foster child is often valued. Typical comments were:

*Foster children can be good company, someone to play with.*

*It can be fun.*

In certain instances the relationships formed were very close. Fostering also meant, ‘you get to meet a lot of people’, which some young people enjoyed:

*It is interesting; you meet a lot of children with problems and you can help them get through it.*

Generally those who were older thought fostering was easier because they led fairly separate lives from the foster children and their presence did not impinge on them.

Children who foster also gained knowledge about their own and others’ feelings and behaviour through fostering. Many expressed how they had learnt how to be kind. For example:

*I have learnt how to be careful about what I say so that I don’t hurt others’ feelings.*
Others had learnt that they should ‘not make fun of someone who has a disability’. Some had developed their understanding of their own emotions:

*I understand feelings more and I can talk to my Mum about how I feel.*

Many have gained an understanding of their own anger thresholds and how to manage their anger. Some of them have also learned to deal with loss, when a young person they have grown attached to had to leave. There were other instances where the placement had been difficult, so the children who foster were glad it had ended.

Fostering provides insights into the adversity many people face and the children and young people who foster often mentioned this, especially in relation to understanding a foster child’s behaviour. They frequently gain some understanding of the difficulties foster children have been through and therefore learned to appreciate their own circumstances:

*[It] made me value what I have and not take things for granted . . . how lucky I am to have good parents.*

In some cases children who foster have learnt about how to ‘parent’ by watching the strategies used by their parents. Some felt it was their role to ‘parent’ too. They also learned not to do things because they saw foster children in trouble for it:

*I have learnt that if you lie you will get caught out.*

*It has given me common sense.*

Some felt that they had a significant role to play in that they could appeal to the foster child as a peer and therefore help them calm down when their parents were unable to.

There are also material advantages to fostering. For some it has meant that a parent is at home more and others mentioned that they now get better Christmas presents, more money, outings and holidays.

**Disadvantages of being involved in fostering**

Some young people felt that there were no disadvantages to fostering, but 18 of the 20 did perceive a negative side to it. Considerable anger was expressed at the verbal abuse and real or potential violence that some of them and their parents are exposed to. Several young people also disliked the stress fostering imposed on their parents and the arguments it caused. They were also aware of how their parents might worry about them:

*Parents have to make sure their kids aren’t pushed around or bullied.*

Often they said they felt inexperienced and did not know what to do:

*[It’s] scary at first because there are people around that you don’t know very well.*

Others didn’t feel they had enough information:

*The child you read about on paper is never the one you get; there is never enough information.*

However, the majority were happy with the information they were given.

There was resentment about the fact that in some families there were different rules for them and for foster children. Foster children may seem to ‘get away’ with more. As one girl said:

*If I did what they did, I’d get grounded for the rest of my life . . . I have to be more strict and mature.*

Others agreed, with comments like:

*I don’t want to be good all the time. It’s a big responsibility.*

It can be difficult to have to share one’s parents’ attention, which caused considerable irritation in some. About half of the participants said they would like more time with their parents. Others also thought they missed out on things. For example, in one family play fighting with
The foster children’s behaviour has an impact within and beyond the family. It did not always make any sense to the young people who fostered, illustrated by comments like ‘they’re idiots’ and ‘they don’t listen’. One young person said:

They might try to pick fights and you might feel like hitting them.

Another stated that ‘they can be aggravating and annoying’. However, one person balanced this by saying, ‘So can my sister!’ Problems with property and personal space also occur:

They might get in your way and use your stuff.

Stealing, in particular, was felt as a betrayal of trust and resented. Some children could not have friends round because of a foster child’s behaviour, which might include violence towards them, though for others this was not a problem. Others had difficulties with their friends who would not visit ‘because they thought the foster children might be thieves’. Some said they had lost friends who believed their parents just fostered for the money.

In some instances children felt they had been exposed to issues they did not want to consider, for example, being told about homosexuality and sexual abuse. One said, ‘I don’t want to think about it.’ They also found it difficult to deal with people who ‘do not wash, get drunk and take drugs’. Some of them had seen someone who was drunk/overdosed and had been very frightened.

Fostering imposes limitations which are sometimes disliked, for example having to be careful about what you say because a foster child will ‘spread gossip’. Also:

[When] you want to go out and they have to come with you, [it] makes you angry.

Given that children who foster often form close relationships with foster children, a disadvantage for them is coping with the emotional impact when the foster child has to leave.

Would they become foster parents?

Most of the young people we interviewed said they thought they might become foster parents. Several of them thought they would wait until their children were older (sometimes older than they had been), so they would not have to share attention with foster children while young.

Those who said they would not become foster parents did so either because they wanted different careers or because they felt unsuited to fostering. One said:

I want to be on my own. I don’t really like kids.

Others felt they were not patient enough.

Some reflected on their parents’ experiences:

I wouldn’t want to leave my wife or kids. I wouldn’t be able to go to work. I worry enough about my Mum.

No, I think about all the stress that Mum and Dad get and all the arguments.

Quite reasonably, several of the young people interviewed had not thought this far ahead and could not answer the question. Nevertheless, none regretted their involvement in fostering or would choose not to do it if they could ‘turn the clock back’.

Advice to other children who foster

One young person remarked that it was important that young people who were about to foster should be given enough information: ‘Tell them what it’s really like.’

The following is a list of advice from the children who foster whom we interviewed:

- If you are jealous don’t foster.
- Look out for yourself. Be wary.
- Look after any precious possessions carefully.
- If you don’t like it you should say.
- Help your parents and help the child with their problems.
- Be friends with them.
• Don’t get too close to them because they will go.
• Don’t gossip to your friends about foster children.
• Help others understand what children go through before they come into foster care.
• Try to get along with them.
• Have your own space to retreat to.
• Don’t keep any secrets.
• Sometimes you have to ignore them or walk away. Don’t get into arguments or fights.
• If you have a problem, don’t bottle it up but speak to someone.
• Ask for help if you need it.
• Don’t tell the children you foster everything.

Implications and concerns
The information we gathered is not necessarily representative of all children who foster, especially as our sample was mostly female. However, the issues highlighted here are pertinent to the young people involved and could be relevant to others who foster. Our findings broadly confirm those of previous research.

The young people we talked to had rarely been consulted by anyone outside the family about starting to foster, although they said they would have liked more training and preparation for this role. Those who had recently received such preparation greatly appreciated it and wanted more. They may also need extra training if the foster child is an asylum seeker who may have difficulty with using English. These young people also valued the support gained from others in a similar position and wanted the children who foster network to be strengthened and extended. In addition they expressed a desire for access to extra support outside the family in times of stress.

The children who foster had definite preferences about whom they could work with as regards foster children. Clearly, it is important for this to be considered when placements are made.

During the interviews some children who foster used their foster children’s names. This may have been because they had been assured of confidentiality. Nonetheless, we felt that they might benefit from a few reminders about the importance of confidentiality. This is a contentious issue as it is artificial not to talk about someone who lives in your house by name. What is said about this person and to whom are probably more important, and we felt these issues needed to be addressed.

Some interviewees felt that it was their place to tell foster children what to do and how to behave, for example not to smoke or take drugs. But is it? This is another issue that warrants further discussion as it pertains to the role of the child who fosters and whether they are a peer or a counsellor to the foster children.

More worryingly, some said that they had kept secrets when foster children had asked them to. One young person said that they were not sure how to decide which secrets to keep and which to tell. Further discussion and training would be useful around this issue.

Feedback to children who foster
As we had not interviewed all the children who foster, we did give all of them the opportunity to comment on our findings, especially issues which had proved contentious. We wrote to them and invited them to meetings. Twenty young people attended, ten of whom we had interviewed. We also asked for their advice for children who foster, since we wanted them to help design a leaflet for young people who might be considering fostering.

We wrote out our findings on large sheets of paper and asked the young people to state, on post-it notes, if they agreed or disagreed and why. Their comments broadly confirmed the results of the interviews, although these young people had not all gained confidence through fostering or any greater understanding of their own emotions. They were divided on issues of confidentiality and keeping secrets, confirming that these are contentious issues. Interestingly, these young people felt that they would
not have liked more preparation for fostering.

Discussion
As a result of listening to the young people, training and support are being made available in order to meet the needs they identified and the ‘children who foster’ support network is being extended. The information we have gathered could also be used in other ways:

- It could be used as part of foster carer training to help potential foster carers understand the impact fostering might have on their children and how they could pre-empt some of the difficulties experienced by children who foster.
- Potential children who foster should have access to this kind of information, perhaps through an information leaflet designed by children already in that role.
- Initial and ongoing training about how to be a young person who fosters should include some of the issues highlighted here.
- Children who foster groups should be developed, as a useful means of support.

Conclusions
Preston (cited in Philpot, 2002) argued that:

...the risks faced by natural children can be decreased if communication, the very element to a family fostering successfully, is promoted. (p 35)

She goes on to say:

Openness and honesty enable natural children to understand and cope with fostering; this environment would enable natural children to discuss these concerns with their parents. (p 35)

It seems that the children who foster whom we interviewed dealt successfully with considerable stress because they were able to discuss this with their families and others. This open communication is also essential within the organisation that fosters. The children who foster have been encouraged to express their concerns in a wider context so that appropriate support can be provided. Many of the negatives experienced by the children who foster could be minimised by offering preparation, supervision and support in order to enable communication within the foster family and the organisation as a whole. As Philpot (2002), says:

Not to listen to and support the children of foster carers can only give them the impression that they are less valued than the children who share their homes... makes the fostering task all the harder. (p 35)

It is clear that the children who foster are an important part of the fostering family. Supporting them as well as their families is likely to lead to more positive outcomes for all concerned.

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